

## Dimitris Daskalopoulos interview

Ahead of a Whitechapel exhibition of his art, the Greek collector Dimitris Daskalopoulos tells Colin Gleadell about his ambition to enrich the cultural scene in Greece.

By Colin Gleadell

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Talk to Dimitris Daskalopoulos about the Greek economy and his brow furrows. As chairman of the Hellenic Federation of Enterprises, he has a tough job at the moment, persuading the government and trade unions that private enterprise is the only way forward for his bankrupt nation. Talk to him about art, however, and his demeanour changes. "Art is my refuge from business," he says with an almost beatific smile.

Daskalopoulos was in London last week for the launch of *Keeping it Real*, an exhibition of works from his collection at the Whitechapel Art Gallery. A trustee of the

Guggenheim Museum in New York and a member of Tate's International Council, his collection of some 400 works are known largely by repute, and the Whitechapel exhibition is the first opportunity for the public to get a taste of it; a taste that is certainly distinctive.

Born in 1957, Daskalopoulos inherited a stake in his family's dairy business, and turned it into Greece's largest food empire, Vivartia. In 2007, he sold his stake in Vivartia for 420 million euros, and now runs a financial services and investment company.

His collecting began with decorative Greek paintings of the 1950s and antiquities. But about 15 years ago he began looking at international contemporary art. A turning point came in 1999 with the purchase of Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* for a record \$1.76 million (£1.1 million pounds).

One of the few historic works in his collection, *Fountain* is based on a urinal which Duchamp found, signed "R Mutt", and exhibited as a work of art in 1917. Although the first *Fountain* was either lost or broken, it became a potent symbol through reproduction for artists in the 1960s, challenging the values of uniqueness and authenticity in art. So in 1964, Duchamp recreated it in an official edition of eight, plus four proofs. Daskalopoulos bought no 5, which was billed as the last from the edition of eight remaining in private hands, and it takes pride of place in his exhibition.



Dimitris Daskalopoulos in front of detail of *Untitled*, 2007 by Gelitin Photo: TREVOR LEIGHTON / APOLLO

The display reveals Daskalopoulos as a buyer of key works at auction over the years. Apart from the Duchamp, there is a phallic latex sculpture by Louise Bourgeois bought in 2004 for \$455,500, the third highest price for Bourgeois at the time. Sarah Lucas's *Bunny Gets Snookered*, (1997), was bought a year earlier for \$163,500, a record for the British artist then. One of his more recent auction buys is Sherrie Levine's polished bronze, *Fountain (Buddha)*, cast in 1996 from a different urinal to Duchamp's, for which he paid a double estimate \$444,000 dollars in November 2008, just as the market was plunging into recession.

But these were not bought as trophies. Daskalopoulos does not pursue fashion as many other collectors do. He has no work, for instance, by Richard Prince. He also admits that much of what he buys is unsaleable because of its size.

"Dealers are just grateful that I take it off their hands," he jokes.

Christoph Buchel's *Unplugged (Simply Botiful)*, for example, is a rambling 5,000 sq ft installation that includes a working bar, sleeping quarters, and piles of junk and debris, far too big to show in the Whitechapel space.

"Mine is not a collection of nice contemporary art," Daskalopoulos explains. "It is more of a statement."

Fascinated by man's creativity in the face of inevitable death, the art he collects is to do with human frailty and finality, and focuses on the human body. The exhibition includes a print of the headless body of artist David Hammons; a wall hanging by Greek artist, Despina Isaia, which spells out the words from a song with strands of her own hair; and Marina Abramovich's video of a performance in which she washes a skeleton.

Some of the works, by Robert Gober and Sarah Lucas, are laced with surreal, sexual innuendo.

Although he runs an investment business, and has spent millions on his collection, Daskalopoulos is not interested in art as a financial investment. The recent discovery that there are a small number of unofficially made Duchamp urinals in Italy, potentially devaluing his official edition, does not worry him. "It doesn't matter," he says. "The work is only made of dust. And the discovery doesn't affect the esteem of the piece in my collection."

But just in case the cynics think the Whitechapel is adding value to his art by exhibiting it, he has signed a contract undertaking that he will not sell anything for three years. That was hardly necessary – he has sold only a handful of works in 15 years. His true ambition is to enrich the cultural scene in Greece by opening his collection to the public.

- **Keeping it Real: the Dimitris Daskalopoulos collection is at the Whitechapel Gallery until May 22, 2011**